

VZCZCXRO9219
PP RUEHCN RUEHGH RUEHVC
DE RUEHHK #0558/01 0841012
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 251012Z MAR 09
FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7243
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HONG KONG 000558

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/CM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [HK](#)

SUBJECT: CIVIC PARTY: MOVING FROM FAN CLUB TO POLITICAL
FORCE

REF: (A) HONG KONG 165 (B) HONG KONG 53 (C) 08 HONG
KONG 1654 (D) 08 HONG KONG 1272

Classified By: Consul General Joe Donovan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment: Hong Kong's Civic Party is unique in having been formed by a group of incumbents already in the Legislative Council, rather than by a movement which then went on to contest elections. While its legislators are among Hong Kong's most popular, the Civics have almost no party infrastructure. As a result, while its incumbents are generally (but not always) safe bets for re-election, the party's ability to contest constituencies it does not already hold is limited. In addition, its reputation as a small, elite organization of prominent barristers creates challenges for broadening the party rank-and-file. Party strategy going forward looks to move away from reliance on media coverage to disseminate policy positions, with greater focus on direct outreach by their "stars" to the general public. The party also is trying to identify constituencies in the grass roots-level District Councils where a Civic Party candidate might win, and then identify suitable candidates to run. However, the party still tends to work on the basis of top-down dissemination of policy proposals, rather than reaction to constituent concerns, leaving it a collection of generals in search of an army. End summary and comment.

Background: Rapid Rise, Electoral Stumbles

12. (C) Unlike their pan-democratic partners in the Democratic Party (DPHK), which grew up from activist movements, the Civic Party (or "the Civics") came together in March 2006 as a coalition of six incumbent legislators. Four of them -- barristers Margaret Ng Ngoi-yee, Ronny Tong Ka-wah, Alan Leong Kah-kit and Audrey Eu Yuet-mee -- had already cooperated as an informal bloc called the "Article 45 Concern Group", reflecting their efforts to realize elections by universal suffrage in accordance with Articles 45 and 68 of Hong Kong's Basic Law. They were joined by two other incumbents -- then-Functional Constituency legislators Mandy Tam Heung-man (Accountancy) and Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung (Social Welfare) -- and a number of pan-democratic academics.

13. (C) The Civic Party's first electoral test was its decision to run Alan Leong in the March 2007 "small circle" Chief Executive election, challenging incumbent Donald Tsang. Leong's winning sufficient nomination votes to enter the race was viewed as a breakthrough in what previously had been seen as an entirely Beijing-orchestrated process. Despite a safe margin in the Electoral Committee to assure his re-election, incumbent Chief Executive Donald Tsang chose to actively campaign against Leong. Most observers saw Tsang as the more effective candidate, and reckoned he would have won even if the race had been decided by popular vote. In the November 2007 District Council elections, the party contested

42 constituencies. Five incumbents now under the Civic Party flag were reelected, and three rookies picked up new seats.

14. (C) With a slate of widely respected legislators projecting an image of competence and ability, the Civic Party went into the September 2008 Legislative Council (LegCo) elections heavily favored, with some pundits predicting they would take over as the flagship of the pan-democratic movement from what at the time seemed to be an ailing DPHK. However, while the Civics won a new seat for District Councilor Tanya Chan Shuk-chong, Mandy Tam's internal battles with Hong Kong's Accountancy Functional Constituency (FC) cost Tam her seat. In addition, Fernando Cheung's decision to give up his Social Welfare FC seat in favor of running in the New Territories West Geographic Constituency (GC) proved disastrous. Finally, Kowloon West GC candidate Claudia Mo Man-ching found herself under fierce attack by League of Social Democrats Chairman Raymond "Mad Dog" Wong Yuk-man, which the Civics believe cost Mo the election

15. (C) The Civic Party's 2008 electoral performance led most observers to conclude the party needed to rectify its weakness at the grass roots. At the party's December 6 internal elections, Professor Kuan Hsin-chi was reelected Chairman and Audrey Eu remained as Party Leader. Vice Chairman Fernando Cheung and Treasurer Mandy Tam, however, resigned to take responsibility for their defeats. While Alan Leong replaced Cheung as Vice Chairman, Cheung's duties as party strategist were picked up by Secretary-General Kenneth Chan Ka-lok. Tanya Chan was elected Chairman of the "Young Civics", the party's youth wing.

HONG KONG 00000558 002 OF 003

Fan Club Mentality

16. (C) Newly-elected Civic Party Secretary-General Kenneth Chan likened the transition the Civics need to make as being from a "fan club" to being a proper political party. To date, the party's success has rested on the star quality of its elite, "blue-blooded" (his term) squad of top barristers, and their ability as individuals to draw votes. The latest Hong Kong University poll shows Audrey Eu maintaining her long-standing position as Hong Kong's most popular legislator, with Alan Leong in second place. This strategy works fine in terms of holding their existing seats but does nothing either to expand their base or groom the next generation of leaders for the party. "Young Civics" head Tanya Chan agreed the "barristers' club" tag maintains an elitist image, but contended that, beyond projecting an image of rationality and professionalism among incumbents, it has also paid dividends in building constituency, with many citizens calling Civic Party ward offices for legal assistance.

17. (C) This leadership-driven model perpetuates a top-down orientation in policy making. The great minds at the top of the party take up particular causes -- in recent weeks, the Civic Party has begun championing green development in addition to its core messages on democracy and the rule of law. Then, however, they have to sell them to their constituency, which poses two problems. The first is that the Civics' constituency is hard to identify, since the party has a small membership and a negligible grass-roots presence. The second is how to deliver the message. Chan expressed some frustration in trying to move the party from a reliance on media coverage drawn by the prominence of individual party members, which risks the media reporting what it chooses, to direct engagement with the general public. Chan admitted it has proven difficult to get the group's "stars" engaged in mundane politicking.

18. (C) For the Civic Party, the effort to expand at the grass-roots District Councils (DC) level has three elements. First is identifying constituencies with vulnerable non-pan-democratic incumbents. Chan claims to have identified a number of DC seats he thinks the Civics could win, but now faces the greater challenge of finding suitable candidates to contest them. Tanya Chan suggested the party's finite manpower and financial resources might mean the Civics will run even fewer candidates in 2011 than in 2007.

19. (C) Second is attempting to win over like-minded independent incumbents, so that they would declare themselves for the Civic Party. Chan recalled many recruits have demurred on the grounds that they do not fit the Civics' elite image, but he believes this is a pretext; most simply prefer to remain independent. (Comment: We don't doubt Chan's analysis, but we also recall Ronny Tong being quoted as dismissing defeated non-barristers Fernando Cheung and Mandy Tam as "not real Civic Party", which remark we expect did little to make non-lawyers feel at home in the party. End comment.) Tanya Chan disputes that they are really any true independents in the DCs, believing most non-affiliated councilors are pro-establishment.

10. (C) The third issue is one which all parties are facing in trying to fill out their middle benches: what career path can they offer. A recruit for a DC seat who aspires to a career in politics will look at each party in terms of how many people are in the queue ahead of him or her to head a LegCo ticket. With only thirty directly-elected seats available and a body of Civic Party incumbents who look reluctant to stand down, prospects for promotion no doubt appear bleak. Chan noted some District Councilors have been in their seats for twenty years without having the chance to stand for a party in LegCo. Unlike the DPHK, which let off some of its younger members' steam by allowing them to headline separate electoral slates (two of which won), both Kenneth Chan and Tanya Chan told us the Civics intend for now to stick to their strategy of one strong electoral slate per geographic constituency.

Generation Gap

HONG KONG 00000558 003 OF 003

11. (C) LegCo freshman Tanya Chan took over the "Young Civics" portfolio at the Civic Party's internal elections, which is fitting in her role as the Civics' newest, youngest legislator. The core of the "Young Civics" is a rump body of mainly student-age volunteers who helped the party during the September 2008 LegCo election. The Civics have attempted to use this group as a stepping stone into recruiting at the university level, but Chan admits this has proven difficult, with many students more focused on their studies than politics. One "Young Civic" working in Chan's office was quoted in the press last fall as facing real challenges even to get his fellow students to register to vote, and admitted he had been unable to recruit a single new member. Chan told us she hopes to get the "Young Civics" involved with a planned speech by former Chief Secretary Anson Chan at Hong Kong University later this year to stir up interest. (Note: Anson Chan discussed her planned outreach to students with the Consul General (ref A). While she remains non-partisan, and has stumped for candidates across the pan-democratic spectrum, Chan appears particularly close to Audrey Eu, and appeared on Eu and Tanya Chan's campaign posters during the September LegCo elections. End note.)

The King is Dead, Where is Our Queen?

¶12. (C) Contacts including Anson Chan and former National People's Congress and LegCo member Allen Lee have suggested to us that, with the retirement of long-time DPHK elder Martin Lee, Audrey Eu is the heir apparent to lead the pan-democratic movement. At the same time, some observers have suggested Eu would rather retire. Her rather bold move in placing Tanya Chan at the top of her electoral slate was a clever way to ensure a high turnout: no one wanted the Civics to lose her seat because of too few votes to seat a second candidate. It was also perhaps a way out had she lost. In any event, while Eu remains popular and influential, we have seen no indication hers is a decisive voice in the pan-democratic camp.
DONOVAN